



Speech by Chief of Mission James C. Cason on the Occasion of the Fourth of July Celebration

July 4, 2005

Ladies and Gentlemen,

After almost three years in Cuba, this will be my last opportunity to address you. I'd like to share with you some reflections on my time here.

Despite my best efforts to prepare for my job in Cuba, the island took me by surprise.

I arrived under the illusion that I might be able to pragmatically engage Cuban officials on issues of mutual concern. Fidel, it appears, didn't trust his officials meeting with me. So I was assigned a MinRex "handler" incapable of straying from the world according to "Granma."

My initial dealings with the Cuban regime quickly brought home to me that in Cuba appearances are fundamentally deceiving. Castro's Cuba is one big Potemkin village. If you go more than three blocks behind the main tourist thoroughfares, you will see the shabbiness and decay of the real Cuba. If you reach out to average Cubans, you will understand what this place is all about. And that is precisely what the Cuban regime does not want us to do.

To better learn about the real Cuba, I traveled seven thousand miles across the island in my first six months. I met with hundreds of average Cubans. All were proud to be Cubans. All were intensely curious about the world, especially about the United States. Many asked for greater global attention to pro-democracy efforts on the island. Many others asked how they could immigrate to the United States.

I remember meeting a group of balseros the U.S. Coast Guard had picked up at sea and returned to Cuba. One man told me that he had tried 26 times to raft illegally to the United States. He vowed to keep on trying until he got there, or the sharks ate him. You have to admire that kind of determination. I later learned that all those balseros were arrested for having met with me.

For a person who has not lived under totalitarian rule, it is hard to grasp what life is like when the State dominates all facets of society. Simply put, analytically understanding how a totalitarian regime functions is not the same thing as seeing people bound by its shackles. I now understand that:

-- To appreciate the sterility of the Castro regime's propaganda, one has to hear it day-in and day-out, week after deadening week.

-- To comprehend this regime's enormous wastage of human talent, one has to see how it stifles all independent initiative and freedom of expression.

-- To understand why two million Cubans have forsaken everything they cherish on the island to start new lives abroad and millions others want to join them, one needs to see the threadbare, intolerant environment that confines them.

My conversations with a wide spectrum of Cubans sharpened my own thinking about what I could accomplish in Cuba. I wanted to encourage Cubans to think about ensuring that their country will someday be democratic, free and prosperous. I also wanted to find creative new ways to help Cuban pro-democracy activists get themselves heard on the island and throughout the world.

How have we advanced these two goals in practical terms? We increased the amount of uncensored information -- in the form of books, magazines, newspapers, and radios -- we make available to Cubans. We offer Cubans extensive free, uncensored Internet access. We bring together Cubans on the island with people on the outside through videoconferences on such issues as democratic transitions, rule of law, and market economies. We provide classes on journalism for those daring enough to write about Cuba as they see it.

As you all know, in Cuba none of us are allowed to speak publicly about democracy or freedom. So I decided to use symbols to our best advantage. You may recall the big sign with the number "75" we added to our holiday decorations last year. Thanks to the extensive media coverage that "75" sign received, the world was reminded that innocent Cubans are thrown into jail for having a different point of view than Castro's. And that "75" sign also enabled Habaneros to learn that the world is appalled by Castro's arbitrary incarceration of political prisoners.

To help people visualize the inhumane conditions in which these political prisoners are confined, my colleagues and I came up with another symbol. We built an exact replica of the Cuban punishment cell that confined a courageous prisoner of conscience, Dr. Oscar Elias Biscet. It also was reported by the media, and is now seen daily by hundreds of Cuban visitors to the Interests Section.

Why use such symbols? Because symbols are especially powerful in closed societies where governments control the media and censor all information.

Let me address those who think it's more dignified to protest the Cuban regime's repression behind closed doors or who think Castro will be more generous if we don't aggravate him. In short, those who think that I'm overly "provocative."

Is it provocative to point out that Cubans live under one of the most repressive regimes in the world? Is it provocative to remind western journalists of Cuba's 300 political prisoners? Is it outside the scope of normal diplomatic activity to provide uncensored information to Cubans? Are holding events for pro-democratic Cuban dissidents or their family members provocative? Should we instead abandon Cubans to isolation from the real world?

Nothing will come -- indeed, in almost 47 years nothing has come -- from being polite to a dictator. If we thought that keeping quiet would bring about political reforms, we would be quiet. If we thought that lifting the U.S. embargo would result in a democratic Cuba, we would have 747's full of Americans on the tarmac tomorrow.

Castro may have grossly mismanaged Cuba's economy, saddled Cubans with huge debts, and become dependent on foreign sugar daddies, but never doubt his control over his Potemkin village. He will allow nothing to jeopardize his total control over all aspects of Cuban life. Look how he has sought to prevent tourists from "contaminating" Cubans to want things they cannot have. He made the tourist enclaves off limits to average Cubans, and enforced this segregation through an intricate network of controls. Look also how all business ventures with foreigners enrich the Cuban regime's coffers without promoting financial independence among Cubans. As the cautionary tale of the former Cuban Foreign Minister Roibana so vividly illustrates, Castro will ruthlessly punish any official who ever so discreetly tries to portray himself as an incipient reformer.

Castro often portrays his wrath against the United States as a battle between a Cuban David against the U.S. Goliath. You may find this ironic, but we at the Interests Section are the David trying to face down Castro's enormous repressive apparatus. We are confined to Havana. Cuban intelligence agents monitor our every move and harass our officers. Cubans who deal with us are exposed to the regime's surveillance and arbitrary reprisals.

Yet the Cuban regime has not managed to scare away pro-democratic activists from meeting with us. So it absurdly maintains that all those who meet with us are "mercenaries" in our pay. Please take note: the U.S. Interests Section has not given and does not give money to members of Cuba's civil society. Do others off the island, especially the Cuban exile community, provide financial help to average Cubans, including dissidents? Of course, and we applaud their generosity.

I've certainly had my share of frustrations during my time here. In particular, I've found it difficult getting some foreign visitors to see that behind Castro's Potemkin village is a cynical, ruthless totalitarian system.

Cuba is hard for Americans to understand because we don't have to worry that our criticism of our own government or society will bring harm to our loved ones. We have difficulty in comprehending a society that regimented all facets of our lives. And like virtually all other foreign visitors, Americans find it hard to grasp how the Cuban regime captures virtually all of the financial benefits of Cuba's limited links with the outside world.

I will leave Cuba with multiple, unforgettable images of Cubans' desperation to leave their own country, despite the island's beauty, the warmth of its people, and Cuba's marvelous music, dance and art.

The most vivid of these images is of a would-be hijacker who commandeered a plane at a local airport. I was asked by the Cuban authorities to talk to him. "I don't believe that you are Cason," the hijacker told me. So I walked out on the tarmac to warn him that he would be facing a long prison sentence in the U.S. if he went through with his plan. The hijacker replied that "I would rather go to jail for 20 years in the U.S. than stay in Cuba." He forced the plane to depart for the U.S., was arrested upon landing, and was later sentenced to 22 years in prison. Can there be a more telling indictment of a regime when such a huge percentage of its citizens passionately dream of abandoning their country for another?

America's greatness has been the result of attracting immigrants from all over the world. Two million Cubans have found refuge and success in our country. Our gain has been Cuba's loss. Think of what Cuba could have been today if all the talent and energy that went into making Miami what it is had remained in Cuba.

But Castro's jury-rigged system cannot last long -- everyone knows that it does not work and is held together by the force of one domineering personality. And that personality is literally on his last legs. Change is inevitable. I'm confident that the Cuban people will not be satisfied with a partial economic opening, but will demand that Cuba undergo a thorough democratic transition.

Don't abandon your Patria, is my advice to Cubans. Stay and be ready for when the personality withers away. Stay and be ready to work for democratic change. When that time comes, the United States and others will be at your side to help you build a democratic, prosperous Cuba -- a Cuba where all Cubans can realize their dreams.

America's symbol of promise to its immigrants is well known. What will be the symbol of the democratic, prosperous Cuba of the future remains to be seen. But given the dynamism that a free Cuba will unleash, I'm sure that its symbol will also be powerfully compelling.

If I could leave my Cuban friends with one final thought, it would be: "kachán, kachán--días mejores pronto vendrán".

Thank you.
